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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the theories of Jurgen Habermas, one of the most influential and prolific constructive philosophers of the past quarter century, with the purpose of showing why Habermas' goal to uncover the inherent aspects of language which make possible communication is unattainable. The paper argues that the very self-referentiality implied by any discussion of language renders impossible any certain knowledge of the subject. In the first section, the paper locates Habermas within a tradition stretching from the Enlightenment to the present, and sketches the way in which his theory is tied up with a conception of human nature which privileges rationality. The next section explicates Habermas' theory, with some marginal comments which are intended to serve both as limited critiques and as points of clarification. In the paper's third section, the central critique of Habermas' theory is developed, attempting to demonstrate the impossibility of "rationally" reconstructing the universal conditions of understanding, since the results of a seemingly rational analysis are always already interpreted within language. Twenty-two notes are included. (SR)

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HABERMAS ON HABERMAS:
THE PERILS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION IN OUR POSTMODERN WORLD

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INTRODUCTION: AN ALIGNMENT OF FORCES

In the opening pages of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty writes: "Philosophy as a discipline . . . sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and of mind. Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims."[1] To this I would add: Philosophy--as opposed to art, and most certainly as opposed to traditional religion--purports to adjudicate such claims in a manner which is *transparent to itself*. Or, to put the point somewhat more concretely: Poets are seized by the muse, while preachers are seized by the voice of God. Hence, neither really *knows* what she or he is saying. Only philosophers can give *reasons* for their claims. It is precisely the ability to provide such reasons, and the assumption that reason is the only truly *universal* quality that all humans--simply by membership in the species--have in common, which allows philosophers to step outside (or more accurately: *above*) their particular cultures and so pronounce judgments from a privileged position with respect to those cultures. The dream is an ancient one: it is the desire to step not only outside of one's immediate situation, but outside of all possible situations; the desire to glimpse a vision of all possible visions. I will call those who have such desires *constructive philosophers*.

Against such philosophers there are those who think such dreams properly belong to times past. One is tempted to label these challengers to constructive philosophers,

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[1] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: University Press, 1979): 3.

deconstructive philosophers, but the phrase is too nearly a contradiction in terms. Similarly, the designation *deconstructive critic* is too nearly a redundancy.[2] The best recourse might be to a term which of late has come to signify the "post-philosophical" impulse in contemporary culture. Accordingly, I shall call these antagonists of constructive philosophy *postmoderns*. In the sense I am using the term, postmoderns are concerned to decenter any mode of discourse, any voice, which aspires to a *privileged* position in the conversation of humanity. Postmoderns are not anti-reason; they are anti-hierarchy. It is just because reason has so relentlessly sought a privileged status, that postmoderns are compelled to challenge it. Reasonable postmoderns (the term is not a contradiction) are not out to abolish rationality entirely. In fact, if *forced* to choose one voice to lord it over the rest in the conversation, many postmoderns might select reason as the most benevolent alternative. But there's the rub. Postmoderns insist that we are not forced to choose. Indeed, they argue, such compulsion to select one alternative could only come from ourselves. Postmoderns want us to give up this compulsion. To put what I have been saying in the "irreverent" tones these antagonists of constructive philosophy delight in sounding: Postmoderns would rather have no gods, than have even a benevolent God.

Given this alignment, there can be little doubt that Jurgen Habermas is one of the most influential--and probably *the* most prolific--constructive philosopher in the past quarter century.[3] Since the late 1970s (at least), rhetoricians have been highly intrigued by

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[2] Of course, on this view, the phrase "constructive philosopher" is also a bit of a redundancy; but one which we should retain for emphasis.

[3] For a detailed discussion of Habermas's influence, see, Richard J. Bernstein's introduction in *Habermas and Modernity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 1-32.

his theories.[4] This intense interest is understandable: Habermas's central focus appears to be on ordinary language. His goal is to uncover the inherent aspects of language which make possible any communication. With the full English translation of Habermas's two volume work on *Communicative Action*, and with the additional recent translation of his collection of essays on *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, we are now in a good position to evaluate whether that goal has been reached--or whether it is likely that it *can* be reached. A careful reading of Habermas convinces me that his goal is unattainable. It shall be may purpose in this essay to show why this is so.

Of course, in an essay of this length it would not be possible to give a detailed reading to even a small fraction of Habermas's work. Fortunately, there is another approach. *Good* constructive philosophy has this elegant irony about it: the more detailed and complex the project becomes, the simpler and more straightforward the thrust of its *crucial* idea appears. In part because Habermas *is* good at what he does, his critics can be also. The contemporary literary critic Jonathan Culler, for example, has nicely framed *the* crucial idea in Habermas's entire project. "Instead of adducing values claimed to stand *beyond* argument," Culler writes,

> Habermas wants to show that certain values are inescapable, and hence available as grounding principles, because they are presupposed by the process of discussion itself. Just as the Cartesian *cogito* purports to show that the self cannot be

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[4] See, the *Journal of the American Forensics Association* 16:2 (1979); Brant Burleson and Susan Kline, "Habermas' Theory of Communication: A Critical Explication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 412-28; Thomas B. Farrell, "The Ideality of Meaning of Argument: A Revision of Habermas," *Dimensions of Argument*, Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation, eds. George Ziegemueller and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1981): 905-26; Robert Francesconi, "The Implications of Habermas' Theory of Legitimation for Rhetorical Criticism," *Communication Monographs* 53 (1986): 16-35; and Mark Pollock, "Is Detente Possible? Habermas and Rhetoric," *Argument and Critical Practices*, Proceedings of the Fifth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation, ed., Joseph W. Wenzel (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1987):191-8.

> doubted or questioned but is presupposed by any act of doubting or questioning, so Habermas argues that certain ideals correlated with a way of life we ought to be striving to bring about--such as truth, sincerity, rationality, freedom, the pursuit of understanding and agreement in a context devoid of coercion--are presupposed by the exersize of language itself.[5]

Even assuming that such principles do somehow "exist" within language, it is precisely the idea that we (as language users) can *know* them with which postmoderns disagree. In the remarks that follow, I argue that the very self-referentiality implied by any discussion of language renders impossible any *certain* knowledge of the subject. The first section of this essay locates Habermas within a tradition stretching from the Enlightenment to the present, and sketches the way in which his theory is tied up with a conception of human nature which privileges rationality. The next section explicates Habermas's theory, with some marginal comments which are intended to serve both as limited critiques and as points of clarification. In the third section I develop my central critique of Habermas's theory.

COMPLETING THE MODERN PROJECT

Let me begin with the claim that Habermas privileges human rationality in developing his theory of communicative action. On this point Habermas is, I think, unequivocal. Wishing to place himself squarely within the best traditions of philosophy (over and against the irrational forces of myth and superstition) Habermas notes, "From the beginning philosophy has endeavored to explain the world as a whole, the unity in the

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[5]Jonathan Culler, "Communicative Competence and Normative Force," *New German Critique*, 35 (Spring/Summer, 1985): 133-144.

multiplicity of appearances, with principles to be discovered in reason--and not in communication with a divinity beyond the world nor, strictly speaking, even in returning to the ground of a cosmos encompassing nature and society."[6] Habermas is willing to grant, of course, that the "totalizing" impulse of classical philosophy has met with severe setbacks along the road to modernity, but the point he wishes to make about rationality concerns not so much the questions addressed by philosophy--whose "theme has changed, and yet it remains the same"--but rather the *method* philosophy employs in seeking answers to these questions. The method is reasoned argument, grounded in ordinary language. And so Habermas can write:

> In contemporary philosophy, wherever coherent argumentation has developed around constant thematic cores--in logic and the theory of science, in the theory of language and meaning, in ethics and action theory, even in aesthetics--interest is directed to the formal conditions of rationality in knowing, in reaching understanding through language, and in acting, both in everyday contexts and at the level of methodically organized experience or systematically organized discourse. The theory of argumentation thereby takes on a special significance; to it falls the task of reconstructing the formal-pragmatic presuppositions and conditions of an explicitly rational behavior.[7]

This passage is interesting for several reasons. Beyond the implicit (although somewhat off-hand) notion that "even in aesthetics" we might be able to engage in rational discussion, this comment provides us with an accurate reflection of what Habermas sees as modernity's "natural" divisions between domains of knowledge--with one important addition:

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[6] Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981): 1. Cited as *TCA*.

[7] *TCA*, 2.

Habermas adds to the already existing domains of knowledge a special concern for *language*.

Let me make this point more explicit. Following Max Weber, Habermas understands the project of the Enlightenment to be inextricably linked to the epoch of modernity. The distinguishing feature of this epoch is, according to Habermas (following Weber), its "separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality and art. These came to be differentiated because the unified world-views of religion and metaphysics fell apart. Since the 18th century, the problems inherited from these older world-views could be arranged so as to fall under specific aspects of validity: truth, normative rightness, authenticity and beauty. They could then be handled as question of knowledge, or of justice and morality, or of taste."[6] The correspondence here is evident: logic and the theory of science is correlated with truth; ethics and action theory is correlated with normative rightness; and, aesthetics is correlated with authenticity and beauty. What is conspicuous by its absence, I think, is any Enlightenment correlative with "the theory of language and meaning." As we will see shortly, this "thematic core"--"the theory of language and meaning"--assumes, for Habermas, a privileged position insofar as it provides the methodological foundations which actually allow us to generate knowledge about the other three thematic cores.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. For now let me continue the analysis with a further discussion of the Enlightenment. Here I think Thomas McCarthy nicely frames

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[6] Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity--An Incomplete Project," trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983): 9.

the historical backdrop against which it is most fruitful to view the development of Habermas's ideas. McCarthy notes:

> The Cartesian paradigm of the solitary thinker--*solus ipse*--as the proper, even unavoidable, framework for radical reflection on knowledge and morality dominated philosophical thought in the early modern period. The methodological solipsism it entailed marked the approach of Kant at the end of the eighteenth century no less than that of his empiricist and rationalist predecessors in the two preceding centuries. This monological approach preordained certain ways of posing the basic problems of thought and action: subject versus object, reason versus sense, reason versus desire, mind versus body, self versus other, on so on.[9]

By the early part of this century, however, Paul Ricoeur's three "masters of suspicion"--Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche--(among others, of course), had gone a long way in challenging (some might even say overturning) the Cartesian model as the paradigm for philosophical investigation. Marx demonstrated how idcological motivations infected our very perception of the world; and Freud helped us to see the unconscious always lurking behind the seemingly rational conscious. But perhaps it was Nietzsche who was most responsible for turning philosophy against itself--a point which Habermas feels compelled to emphasize. He writes, "Nietzsche--and this puts him above all others--denies the critical power of reflection with and only with the means of reflection itself."[10] In criticizing Nietzsche's own self-referential moves, it must be conceded that Habermas has found here an antinomy at least as problematic as any that could be lodged against his theory of communicative action.

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[9] *TCA*, vii.

[10] Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968): 299.

Still, there is no sense in which Habermas is seeking to overturn the work of Marx, Freud, Hegel or others in this philosophical tradition. Indeed, Habermas's work owes equally indispensable debts to Marx, Freud, and the entire tradition of critical theory. The important point to see in all of this, however, is that for Habermas it is possible to go too far in the radical exercise of critical theory. The abandonment of modernity in the turn toward post-structuralism, post-Heideggerianism (or just postmodernity in general) has led, according to Habermas, to the undesirable "desublimation of spirit" and its consequence: the "disempowering of philosophy."

Leaving aside the abortive attempts by logical positivism to recover, in the early part of this century, something of Cartesian rationalism, it was left for Habermas to revive the spirit of modernity and thereby to complete the Enlightenment project by developing a theory (a new philosophy perhaps) which could transcend both Cartesian rationalism and the hyper-critical self-reflection of Nietzsche. Whether or not he has succeeded remains to be seen, but by now it is clear where he is going with his attempts. Again, McCarthy is succinct in his explanation of Habermas's approach: "Habermas's response to the decline of the paradigm of consciousness is an explicit shift to the paradigm of language--not to language as a syntactic or semantic system, but to language-in-use or speech. Thus he develops the categorical framework and normative foundations of his social theory in the form of a general theory of communicative action."[11] Additionally, it is worth noting that for Habermas, the study of communicative action has as its goal the emancipation of each individual in society. This fundamentally Enlightenment oriented goal explicitly envisions

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[11] *TCA*, ix.

a society where decisions are based on *communication* free from domination; and as such the goal is founded entirely upon the emancipatory potential which must inherently exist in language itself. Habermas is eloquent on this point. "The human interest in autonomy and responsibility," he asserts "is not mere fancy, for it can be apprehended *a priori*. What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us."[12]

LANGUAGE AND THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

The statement I have just quoted makes a substantial claim indeed--a claim upon which, if I am not mistaken, all of Habermas's theory of communicative action rests. It is worth, then, explicitly examining the way in which Habermas sees the structure of (ordinary) language (in use) as positing for us autonomy and responsibility. Consider, then, the following four statements which one might encounter in an ordinary language conversation:

1) The lexical, grammatical meaning and reference transfer unit is in fixed contact with the horizontal stabilizing unit.

2) The book is on the table.

3) Put the book on the table.

4) I wish the book were on the table.

The task that Habermas sets for himself in developing his theory of communicative action is to identify and reconstruct the universal presuppositions about the use of language which will enable any (rational) individual to understand each of the above statements.

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[12] *Knowledge and Human Interest*, p. 314.

With such a theory one could, presumably, delimit the entire domain of understandable speech acts. There is, then, a strong sense in which--despite Habermas's own protestations to the contrary--his theory mirrors the attempts of philosophers from Kant to Rawls. The implicit claim, as far as Habermas is concerned, is that from a theory of language which delimited all understandable speech acts, one could derive at least the principles of a fully rational, fully just, society. This makes the coincidence among Habermas, Kant, and Rawls clear. While Kant sought to derive the principles of a just society from the universal structures of any rational consciousness, and Rawls sought to derive the principles of justice from an imagined ideal bargaining game, Habermas's turn toward language represents his own attempt at this type of synthetic derivation. This is the way in which Habermas understands language as "positing autonomy and responsibility."

So far I have been discussing the goal of Habermas's project, now I what to turn toward a detailed examination of the specifics of his theory. In so doing I want to take a close look at the four statements which I drew up previously; but before doing this it is important to be clear about the way in which I am using these statements to illustrate points about Habermas's theory. Let me begin with a comment that might sound circular, but which I cannot find a better way of expressing: for Habermas, any speech act which is fully understandable must satisfy *all* the conditions which make speech acts fully understandable. The four statements above, then, are not to be seen as different types of speech acts *per se*; rather, they are to be seen as speech acts which thematize the different ways in which understanding itself is made possible.

Consider what might be the simplest example of this. Statement (1) shows us that for any speech act to be understandable it must be comprehensible. All speech acts which

thematize comprehensibility Habermas labels *communicative* speech acts. If, for example, the speaker who uttered statement (1) was challenged as being incomprehensible, his or her proper response would be to render the statement in question comprehensible by means of explication, elucidation, paraphrase, translation, semantic stipulation, and so forth.[13] In the case we are considering comprehensibility might be reestablished by the speaker saying, simply, "What I meant was, the book is on the table."

Now, the term "comprehensibility" expresses only a minimal criterion. It is possible, in Habermas's theory, for a statement to be both comprehensible and yet not understandable. An example might be the statement:

> 5) Because I sincerely promised to bring the book to school today, I left the book at home.

The sense in which comprehensibility and understandability are linked can be made clear if, to paraphrase Habermas, we say that any speech act in ordinary language-in-use will, by definition, use the medium of language to inter-relate rationally three non-linguistic "worlds": the Objective, Social, and Subjective. Again, while it is necessarily the case that all speech acts will inter-relate all three worlds, statements (2) through (4) demonstrate the ways in which any one of these three "worlds" can be thematized in a given speech act.

For example, statement (2)--what Habermas would call a *constative* speech act--most directly relates to (and thereby thematizes) what Habermas labels the *Objective* world--a world in which speech functions as a means of representing states of affairs in such a way that the truth of propositions is linked to the ability to undertake effective purposive action. Statement (3)--what Habermas would call a *regulative* speech act--most directly relates to

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[13] See, Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 288.

(and thereby thematizes) what Habermas labels the *Social* world--a world in which speech functions as a means of establishing interpersonal relationships in such a way that the rightness of norms of action are linked to the ability to undertake moral-practical action. Finally, statement (4)--what Habermas would call an *expressive* speech act--most directly relates to (and thereby thematizes) what Habermas labels the *Subjective* world--a world in which speech functions as a means of disclosing the speaker's own personal beliefs and desires in such a way that the truthfulness of a speaker's statements is linked to his or her ability to represent authentically to others, and to his or herself, his or her internal beliefs or desires.

With the explication of these three "worlds"--Objective, Social, and Subjective--and with an understanding of the corresponding speech acts which they thematize--constative, regulative, and expressive--and with the still further understanding that somehow comprehensibility also comes into play when discussing statements in ordinary language-in-use, we now have at least a preliminary set of "key terms" which constitute Habermas's theory of communicative action. So far I have tried to sketch out the ways in which these terms relate to one another. It might be advisable briefly to recapitulate what has been said up to now. Put as succinctly as possible, one might say that for Habermas any "well-rounded" statement in ordinary language-in-use will be comprehensible to any rational being; will have something to say about the external, objective world; will have something (at least implicitly) to say about the relationship between the speaker and his or her auditor(s); and will have something to say about the beliefs and desires of the speaker.

Perhaps the best way of getting a handle on what I have just said about the inter-relatedness of Habermas's four types of speech acts and his three worlds, is to work

backwards from "problematic" statements which seem at first glance not to say all the things which I have suggested every statement must say, with an eye toward reconstructing what it is these seemingly problematic statements are really saying. Consider the condition that every statement must say something about the external world. One might assert that this is not a necessary condition for understanding. It could be argued that the statement

6) Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street

while obviously not relating to anything in the "external" world is nonetheless fully understandable. But Habermas would undoubtedly reply that by uttering statement (6) the speaker really meant something like

6') In Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker street

The addition of the phrase "in Arthur Conan Doyle's stories," simply makes it clear, Habermas would argue, that we are indeed talking about something in the external world--i.e., the stories themselves.

Again, consider a similar case. One might argue that the statement

2) The book is on the table

is fully understandable without the hearer knowing anything about the speaker's beliefs or desires. Habermas would reply, as before, that in uttering statement (2) what the speaker really meant was something like

2') I am being sincere when I assert to you that the book is on the table.

As in the previous example, the addition of the phrase "I am being sincere" makes it clear that the speaker is of necessity saying something about his or her own beliefs.

The final condition that I need to discuss--the condition which asserts that any statement must of necessity say something about the relationship between the speaker and

his or her auditor(s)--is by far, I think, the most interesting and complex. Precisely what makes it interesting and complex is what McCarthy refers to as the "striking feature of communication in ordinary language . . . its characteristic `doublestructure.'"[14] This "double structure" exists just because every statement in language both says something about something, and says something about the *conditions* for its own understanding.

The important point to see here is that the "double structure" of language is what allows Habermas to argue that, in uttering statement (2), a speaker (if he or she is to be understood) really means something like

2") I am hereby rightfully asserting (to you) that the book is on the table.

Habermas argues that it is "rightful" for a speaker to assert something that he or she wishes another to understand if and only if the intersubjective *conditions for understanding* between the speaker and hearer do in fact obtain--that is, if and only if the context in which the speaker and hearer find themselves is "right" for understanding to occur.

I want now to make one final point about the relationship Habermas sees between speech acts--communicatives, constatives, regulatives, and expressives--and the three worlds to which he ties these speech acts. But in order to do this a brief comment on the terminology is necessary.

Habermas is, of course, concerned to be as precise as possible in the formulation of his theory. It is just for this reason that Habermas generally eschews the term "argument." The problem with this term is that in its normal usage--as, roughly, a set of more or less reasonable, more or less coherent statements designed to persuade someone of the truth

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[14] *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*, p. 282.

or falsity of another statement--it fails to give a clear definition of its own essence, since the terms "coherent" and especially "reasonable" are themselves arguable. To avoid this difficulty, in many of the places where one might expect the term "argument" to be used, Habermas instead employs what he takes to be the more precise term *discourse.* According to Habermas's theory, discourse functions as a special instance of language in which second order talk about language is, *a fortiori*, linked to rationality in such a way that only those statements which could be shown to be either consistent or inconsistent with all other statements would be allowed consideration by participants in discourse, and only those individuals who could understand consistency or inconsistency among statements would be allowed to participate in discourse.

I want to reserve for the next section a discussion of the theoretical implications of this view of discourse, for now let me return to the final point I was making about the relationship Habermas sees between speech acts and his three worlds. If we grant Habermas that all speech acts in ordinary language-in-use will be comprehensible and will have something to say about his three worlds, and if we further adopt the vocabulary I sketched above, several interesting conclusions about speech acts and discourse emerge. Notice, for example, that there is no way in which one can engage in discourse about the comprehensibility of speech acts. What this means, simply, is that it makes no sense for a speaker to respond to a charge of "incomprehensibility" by attempting to show that his or her statement was somehow consistent or inconsistent with other statements. Consistency is not in question, and in fact it is likely that such an approach would only compound the problem. (Of course, if the speaker feels his or her accuser does in fact comprehend what is being said, and is therefore being insincere in his or her charge, it does make sense for

the speaker to respond, but only so that the accuser's sincerity and not the speakers comprehensibility is brought under examination.) Habermas would maintain that the only "proper" response to a charge of incomprehensibility would be for the speaker to engage in a process of translation, explication, and so forth, in order to re-establish comprehensibility and thereby to allow conversation to continue.

Similarly, speech acts in ordinary language-in-use which thematize the Subjective world (i.e., expressives) are also, for Habermas, beyond the realm of discourse. To see why this is so requires that we buy Habermas's strong (almost tautological) claim that nothing can ever be known empirically about an individual's Subjective world *qua* Subjective world. This does not mean that science, for example, could never tell us anything about, say, an individual's neuro-physiological make-up, including perhaps which areas of his or her brain happen to respond to a given stimuli; but for Habermas this sort of observation tells us only about the individual's brain *qua* matter, and not about his or her mind *qua* a thing which harbors beliefs and desires.[15] It is precisely this dualism which enables Habermas to maintain, for example, that it is never possible to engage in discourse with a speaker uttering the statement

4) I wish the book were on the table

even if, in the very course of uttering this statement, the speaker removes the book in question from the table. Granted, such an act--removing the book while uttering the statement--would demonstrate that the speaker were being inconsistent in his or her actions

[15] For an interesting discussion of this point see, Thomas McCarthy, "Reflections on Rationalization in The Theory of Communicative Action," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed., Richard J. Bernstein, (Cambridge: MIT press, 1985): 176-191.

and utterances. But, if one holds to the view of beliefs and desires which Habermas seems to, the inconsistency of actions and utterances could not tell us anything for certain about a person's inner state. Confronted with such a situation one could either accuse the speaker of lying, and point to the speaker's actions as evidence to support the accusation, or, assume the speaker were not lying--which would then, of necessity, mean that the speaker were suffering from some psychological disorder--and attempt to involve the speaker in a therapeutic situation designed to relieve this condition. The first of these responses--accusing the speaker of lying--leads to a breaking off of communication intended toward reaching understanding. Such communication could be reestablished when all individuals in communication were convinced that all other individuals were being sincere. The more interesting case, perhaps, is that in which the individual is suffering from psychological disorder.

Recalling the definition of discourse given above, it becomes apparent that what is problematic about the case of such an individual is not that his or her statements cannot be shown to be consistent or inconsistent (in fact, they most probably can readily be shown to be inconsistent), but rather that the individual in question (again, presuming he or she is not lying) cannot *recognize* the inconsistency of his or her statements. From this follows the obvious conclusion that only (sincere) rational individuals are allowed to participate in discourse. (This provision amounts to only a slight restatement of the second part of the definition of discourse given above.)

But even this seemingly obvious point--that discourse presupposes rationality--is not without some problematic implications. Consider, for example, the types of speech acts about which one can engage in discourse. Not surprising, these turn out to be the

remaining two types of speech acts in ordinary language-in-use: constatives and regulatives. So, statements like

2) The book is on the table

and

7) I promise to bring the book

are statements about which rational individuals can engage in discourse precisely because these statements "hook up" with other statements about which one can engage in discourse (constative or regulatives) in such a way that one is left with a set of statements which, taken together, comprise a rational way of talking about the Objective and Social worlds--and which could, if we so desired, be further subdivided into a set of statements which comprise a rational way of talking about the Objective world, and a set of statements which comprise a rational way of talking about the Social world. I have already demonstrated that way in which statements in both of these worlds inter-relate to one another when I pointed out above that in order to understand statement (7) one must both know roughly what it means to bring a book and what it means to make a promise, and in order to understand (2) one must know roughly what it means for a book to be on a table and in what contexts this meaning can be understood.

One might now ask, What constitutes a "rational" way of talking about something? If I am correct in my analysis up to this point, there are two senses in which the term rational can be understood here--what I will call a weak sense and a strong sense. The weak sense of understanding the term rationality simply asserts that we take "rationality" as roughly synonymous with "internal consistency." The elegance of Habermas's theory (and it is certainly not without elegance) derives, I think, from the fact that in its pure form it

relies simply on an understanding of rationality only in the weak sense. If we understand rationality in this way there is, of course, a content neutrality operating here, similar perhaps to that we find in Kant's categorical imperative. The imperative "act so that the maxim of your action could be a universal rule" seems, after all, not to allow us to prefer, on any moral ground, the act of not eating chocolate on Fridays, and the act of not murdering on Mondays.[16]

To see how this notion of content neutrality operates in regard to Habermas's understanding of rationality within his theory of communicative action one need only consider the case of a society in the grip of a mass psychosis. Presumably, such a society could still "function" in the same way that individuals with certain (non-severe) psychoses can "function" within normal societies. In fact, all that would be required for this psychotic society to function would be the fulfillment of the condition that the more "serious" the psychosis, the more strongly it affected each member of the society. It will immediately be objected, of course, that the severity of this psychosis could not be increased *ad infinitum* since, at some level, reality (what we non-psychotics take to be reality) would intervene such that, for example, it would become impossible for individuals in this society to say "so and so is not dead" when in fact he or she was plainly dead. I do not want to tie my argument up too strongly within a discussion of possible levels of psychosis. It seems to me that the only point upon which I need insist is simply that the level of mass psychosis in *any* society can reach only to the level at which the psychosis renders impossible any principle

[16] See further, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Norte Dame: University Press, 1984): 45-6.

of order among individuals in society. This, it seems to me, follows from the definition of society as, roughly, any group of individuals whose actions follow some ordering principle. The problem with this approach to rationality, and the concomitant notion of society it embodies, is simply that it cannot prevent us from labeling rational those societies which, say, accept statements like "We promise to undertake only peaceful actions with regard to our foreign neighbors," while at the same time accepting statements like "We must build more bombs," if there could be found some consistent, although not necessarily true (or just), way of ordering those statements. To take the limit example: the weak sense of rationality I sketch above would, as far as I can see, not allow us to say that Nazi Germany was an irrational society.

Plainly this is unacceptable. In order to remedy this inability to judge, on the basis of rationality, between ordered societies, Habermas at certain points in his theory shifts to what I have labeled the strong sense of rationality. This sense takes rationality as including the consistency principle above, and as adding a principle which roughly asserts that all rational individuals should be open to new "theories" which allow them better to understand (to manipulate) the world. On this view of rationality Habermas finds himself insisting "on the possibility of evaluating worldviews, if not by the degree of their cognitive adequacy, then by the degree to which they hinder or promote cognitive-instrumental learning processes."[17] In this way Habermas sees rationality in the strong sense tied up with developmental theories, and "open-mindedness."

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[17] *TCA*, 61.

There are advantages and disadvantages to adopting this sense of rationality. The obvious advantage is that it provides one with a way of judging between the psychotic societies of the above examples, and non- psychotic societies. The judgments are now to be made on the basis of learning ability and open-mindedness, so that it becomes possible to label the psychotic society above as irrational precisely because these societies are not open to accepting our (non-psychotic) theories of reality. There is no problem here in knowing who has the "truer" theory of reality, since "truer" always means, roughly, that theory which allows us to do more things.

The real disadvantage of adopting this strong sense of rationality is, I think, that it tends to wreck the elegance of Habermas's theory. There are numerous good reasons for preferring societies of individuals who act consistently and are open-minded and display a capacity to learn over societies of individuals who merely act consistently, but it seems that Habermas has made a category mistake if he then argues that these last two qualities--open-mindedness and the ability to learn--are somehow necessary conditions for rationality. The end result is that by adopting this strong sense of rationality, Habermas has made his own theory of communicative action less precise. To see why this is so it is only necessary to see that while judgments about the consistency or inconsistency of one set of statements with another set of statements have a certain mathematical precision to them, judgments about the learning ability of individuals and their open-mindedness are surely less precise, both because these latter judgments rely on secondary theories of cognitive development (Piaget being the preeminent example) and because even open-minded individuals must (presumably) adopt a closed-minded stance toward some questions (i.e., the non-allowableness of contradiction, etc.).

From what I have said above, one would be justified in seeing the quality of "universality" as perhaps the most important distinction between the two senses of rationality: the weaker sense being universal, and the stronger sense being non-universal. If I am correct in this view then, once again, we can see Habermas as purchasing the ability to attach the label of irrationality to societies which seem--to us Westerners, at this time, and not without good reason--demonstrably unjust, at the price of being able to make universal statements about language.

THE SPECTRE OF SELF-REFERENTIALITY

Perhaps the most interesting point about the final sentence of the last section--besides the rather odd notion that the ability to make judgments about the rationality of a given society might somehow perforce be linked to the ability to make seemingly esoteric statements about the universality of language--is that anyone would take the inability to make these universal statements about language as a high price to pay for anything. But Habermas would in fact see this as an immeasurable price to pay. The reasons for this attitude have been alluded to throughout this essay, but they all come down essentially to this: Habermas, like some great philosophers of past and present (I have mentioned Kant and Rawls), thought that he had finally come upon the ultimate completion of that eternally incomplete phrase, "The just society is . . . " According to Habermas, we have to look no further for the completion of this phrase than a careful study of our own use of language. This is what it means for Habermas to argue that language posits for us autonomy and responsibility. No doubt defenders of Habermas far and wide will object to the cavalier way in which I have attempted to encapsulate his

immense programmatic thought. There is, of course, some truth to the criticism that I have been overly broad in my sketch of Habermas's project. I am reminded here of Austin's quip about writing philosophy, "There's the bit where you say it and the bit where you take it back." And, to be sure, Habermas does a good deal of "taking it back." Still, it would be equally unfair to Habermas to put his point too weakly. One thing he does not take back, as far as I can see, is precisely this point that language posits for us, in its own very deep structure, autonomy and responsibility--in a word, I think, justice. Notice further that what Habermas is talking about when he uses the term "language" is not some stuffy philosophical jargon, or some fluffy literary musings. When he uses the term "language" Habermas means nothing more (or less) than our own ordinary language in everyday use. It's as if, every time we use ordinary language, we "speak" the concepts of justice without realizing it. Every time we speak to the corner grocer about the condition of the lettuce, or the poor shape the tomatoes are in, we are "speaking" justice. Every time we argue with our mechanic about the way the car was fixed, we are "speaking" justice. It is little wonder, then, that for someone with such a monumental view of ordinary language, the suggestion that universal statements about it are impossible would be seen as devastating.

While this may go a long way in explaining Habermas's nervousness about attacks against the universality of his project, it does little, I think, to shore-up that universality. Up to this point in the essay, I have merely been attempting to place Habermas's thought within a historical context, and then to reconstruct the main points of his theory of communicative action with only tangential critiques along the way. I have, however, not yet systematized my own major argument against the theory. What follows is an attempt to do

just that. Before beginning I want to say a word about the general type of critique I will be undertaking.

I take it that there are essentially two ways of critiquing any theory (philosophical or otherwise). One way is to grant that the theory is correctly worked out, but that the results are either demonstrably false, or else that they are results which, if adopted as "true," would in some way lead to a world in which the disadvantages following from the theory would outweigh the advantages. The second way of critiquing a theory is to show that within the development of the theory itself an internal contradiction exists, and has either been overlooked or purposefully obfuscated. Of course if a theory is internally inconsistent, its results should be demonstrably false; but it does not follow that if the results of a theory are false, or if they are in some way "net-disadvantageous," then the theory is internally inconsistent. Obviously, both types of critique are useful; I shall be attempting the second type. In so doing I shall attempt to show that Habermas's theory of communicative action is somehow internally contradictory. Perhaps the essential idea behind the method of the critique I shall be employing was first formally set out by the mathematician and logician Kurt Godel, who, in the early part of this century, showed that--to put it *very* roughly--any system which is powerful enough to reference itself--language being perhaps the premier example of such a system--cannot generate a proof of its own consistency.[18] The essentially self-referential character of language, then, is what causes Habermas's theory to break-down.

To see why this is so, we can begin by considering Habermas's own statement that

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[18] For a brilliant discussion of Godel's work see, Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

8) Reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech.[19]

Quite obviously, this statement is saying something about language, and is therefore self-referential. Given what I have sketched out in section two of this essay, it might now be interesting to examine the way in which this statement (and those like it) might "fit" in Habermas's own theory.

The first point to note about the fit of this statement is that, despite the redundancy in the phrase "inherent telos," there appear to be no problems here in regard to comprehensibility. Habermas does not, therefore, seem to be violating the principle that understandable statements must be comprehensible to rational individuals. The emphasis I place here on appearances is crucial, for, as I shall suggest later in this section, a strong argument can be made that the comprehensibility of this statement is the aspect of this utterance most in need of examination. For the present, however, I wish to defer a discussion of the theoretical problems with Habermas's notion of "comprehensibility." Let us then, for the time being, assume arguendo that this statement need not be thematized with respect to its comprehensibility.

Having set aside comprehensibility, we are left with three ways to thematize statement (8)--each of these thematizations involving one of Habermas's three "worlds." It is possible to dispose of one of these thematizations rather quickly by simply noting that it would be quite bizarre if we had reason to suspect that Habermas were being insincere in making this statement. Hence, even though we could see statement (8) as saying roughly

> 8a) I am being sincere when I assert (to you) that reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech

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[19] *TCA*, 287.

since the phrase "I am being sincere" is assumed as true, thematizing this statement with respect to the speaker's Subjective World--i.e., as an expressive speech act--leads to no interesting conclusions.

We are left, then, with two other possible ways of thematizing the statement. Either, we can see it as calling into question the truth of some objective reality, in which case it might roughly be put as

> 8b) I assert to you that reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech

or, we can see it as calling into question the rightness of some norm of action in our inter-subjective (Social) world in which case it might be put as

> 8c) I am hereby rightfully asserting (to you) that reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech

Let me add here, that while I think statement (8c) reflects the proper way of thematizing statement (8) with respect to the Social world (i.e., as a regulative speech act), I am willing to concede that statement (8) might be thematized with respect to the Social world in such a way as to leave

> 8d) It should be the case that reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech

or even

> 8e) We should act as though reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech

Essentially the reason I am willing to concede statements (8d and e) as possible thematizations of statement (8), is that I will argue statements (8a-e) all suffer from the same antinomy of self-referentially. To see how this antinomy develops, we can begin by noting that statements (8a-e) have at least this much in common: they must all be

statements about which it is possible to engage in discourse. This much is certain from the fact that all of these statements can be thematized either with respect to the Objective or the Social world. Habermas's theory then tells us that any statement about which we can engage in discourse is a statement about which we can ultimately come to some universal understanding: both as to the truth value of the statement, and the statement's normative rightness. But the very reason that discourse is able to lead us toward universal understanding is that the theory of communicative action from which this property of discourse is derived *assumes* that understanding is the inherent telos of human speech.

Let me be precise on this point. The theory of communicative action purports to uncover the universal conditions which make understanding possible. If these conditions are uncovered, then, in theory, given an infinite amount of time one could generate a complete set of only understandable statements by applying these very conditions. In fact, the method of applying these conditions in order to generate understandable statements is exactly what is meant by discourse. This set of understandable statements would include only those statements which are true and rightful, since, even though this is a conceptually infinite set, it must still be a set whose members (i.e., statements about the Objective and Social worlds) are consistent. Hence, one could not find, within this set, two statements that were inconsistent one with another. This view of discourse can be justified, I would argue, based on Habermas's own definition. "I shall speak of `discourse,'" he writes,

> only when the meaning of the problematic validity claim conceptually forces participants to suppose that a rationally motivated agreement could in principle be achieved, whereby the phrase "in principle" expresses the

idealizing proviso: if only the argumentation could be conducted openly enough and continued *long enough*.[20]

Presumably, then, statement (8) must either be a member of this set, or not be a member. If statement (8) were not a member of this set, then the set could not exist. This follows from the fact that one can uncover the universal conditions which make understanding possible only by examining language which is used to reach an understanding. Yet, it also follows that there is no way of knowing whether statement (8) is a member of this set, since, in order to test whether statement (8) were a member, it would be necessary to assume that it were a member. Such a presumption would then mean that we would always find statement (8) within this set because *we initially placed it there*.

It might be tempting to say, then, that we can never know anything for certain about language, and therefore Habermas's entire project is misdirected. But perhaps what is really made problematic in the above discussion is what it means to "know" in the first place. If I am correct in my criticism to this point, it seems clear that we can never know anything for certain about language *through the use of discourse*. To put it more succinctly: Habermas's theory states that no one could *rationally* argue with the theory.

There may, however, be another way of "knowing" with regard to language. At the beginning of this section I suggested that we set aside, for a moment, any discussion of the comprehensibility of statement (8). Now I want to return to this point, and see where such a discussion might lead. Thematizing statement (8) in regard to its comprehensibility would involve taking as unproblematic the truth and rightness of the statement, and the sincerity of the speaker, and focusing instead on the ways in which the statement might be

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[20] *TCA*, 42, emphasis added.

misunderstood by participants in communication. The goal would be to clear up any misunderstanding through the means of translation, explication, and so forth. The speaker would no longer concern him or herself with the Objective, Social, or Subjective worlds; rather, if a "world" were involved at all, it would be the unique "world" of language. That this is, indeed, a unique world for Habermas is made obvious by his closing remarks in "What is Universal Pragmatics?" "Finally" writes Habermas,

> I introduced the linguistic medium of our utterances as a special region; precisely because language (including non-propositional symbol systems) remains in a particular half-transcendence in the performance of our communicative actions and expressions, it presents itself to the speaker and the actor (*preconsciously*) as a segment of reality *sui generis*. Again, this does not preclude our being able to adopt, in regard to linguistic utterances or systems of symbols, an objectivating attitude directed to the sounds or signs.[21]

Let me be clear on one point here. I do not wish to suggest that Habermas himself would choose to thematize statement (8) in regard to its comprehensibility; rather, what I am arguing in this section, is that regardless of how one chooses to thematize this statement there are significant problems in Habermas's theory. We have seen, earlier in this section, that thematizing statement (8) as a constative or regulative speech act leads to an antinomy: Habermas's theory cannot rationally justify the criteria of discourse necessary to rationally justify the theory. An antinomy of a different sort is reached if we now choose to thematize statement (8) as a communicative speech act. For all Habermas's talk about rationality and inter-subjectivity, thematizing statement (8) in this way (as a communicative speech act) would move us away from "rational" discussion, toward a type of intuitive approach toward knowing. As I have suggested in section two, it makes no sense to argue about the

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[21] See, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976): 67, emphasis added.

comprehensibility of statements; one either understands, or one does not. In considering the problems that this approach entails for Habermas's theory, Thomas McCarthy is, I think, right on target when he writes:

> Although Habermas has explicitly dropped the earlier characterization of his project as a 'transformed transcendental philosophy' in favour of the more empirical terminology of 'rational reconstruction', the considerations he has until now adduced in support of his proposals are decidedly more 'philosophical' than 'empirical'. . . As even a cursory reading of Habermas's writings on universal pragmatics makes evident, the construction of the hypotheses he advances therein does not make essential use of such procedures. In fact, they seem to rely very heavily on just the 'reflection on his own speech intuitions', analysis of fundamental concepts (e.g. 'understanding', 'truth', 'discourse', 'rationality'), and critical appropriation of relevant literature that is so characteristic of 'philosophical' in contrast to 'empirical' modes of thought.[22]

The larger point implicit in McCarthy's criticism is one that I have tried to make explicit in this paper. I have tried to show how the self-referential nature of language renders impossible any certain knowledge about itself. In this section specifically, I have attempted to demonstrate the impossibility of "rationally" reconstructing the universal conditions of understanding, since the results of one's seemingly rational analysis are, so to speak, *always already interpreted within language*.

CRITICAL CODA: APPROPRIATING HABERMAS'S INSIGHTS

Conclusions like the one I have just advanced--stated, as it was in such harsh tones--tend to strike fear (and possibly antipathy) in the hearts of constructive philosophers like Habermas, while at the same time resonating with an unwarranted arrogance in the

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[22] Thomas McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed., Thompson and Held (Cambridge: MIT press, 1980): 61-62.

hearts of postmoderns like Derrida. Perhaps the real point to take from this essay is that neither result should be the case. The kind of self-referentiality problem which Habermas runs up against is no less inherent in *Of Grammatology*--a work which seeks to deconstruct Western metaphysics by using the very tools which Western metaphysics itself constructed--it is only less apparent given the style of Derrida's writing. So arrogance is an unwarranted response; but so is fear. One will fear this conclusion only if he or she sees the existence of unquestionable, universal truths about language as inextricably tied up with our ability to interact justly with our fellows. This is simply not the case; as it is also not the case that language posits autonomy and responsibility for us by *imposing* a set of universal criteria for its use. These essentially negative insights about Habermas's theory do have a positive side, however. Although it cannot give us a set of universal precepts about language, what the theory of communicative action can and does give us is an important and well-thought out way of talking about ourselves, as well as a new and powerful way of *choosing* to use language. Perhaps, in the final analysis, Habermas's only real mistake was in not seeing that language can only really posit for us autonomy and responsibility by opening up *choices,* and it can only do this by forever remaining always *just beyond* elucidation.